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ABSTRACT

Students in college basic writing courses need to consider their own written language and to compare it with other students' work before they can develop a sense of the symbolic relationship between language and experience. Because of a lack of previous writing experience, basic writers have no sense that the "facts" about which they write are statements and therefore created, and no sense that this creation is a matter of choice dependent on the writer's intentions. A sequence of writing assignments has been developed that calls for basic writing students to describe, analyze, and compare their decision making processes in a number of out-of-class experiences as well as in the experience of writing papers. The assignments and the examination of other students' papers help students to see that writers can choose many different ways to describe the same kinds of things, that writing is not alien to other life experiences, that their writing behavior can be classified in new ways, and that the use of language to define the meaning of an experience lies outside the event itself. The final assignment asks students to write a long paper about themselves as decision makers, incorporating into it generalizations drawn from their previous papers. This direct encounter with their own ideas objectified on the page reveals more about the writing process than anything teachers can tell them. (GT)

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A SEQUENCE OF ASSIGNMENTS FOR BASIC WRITING: TEACHING TO PROBLEMS "BEYOND THE SENTENCE": Paper presented at the 1980 Conference on College Composition and Communication

Basic Writing students at the University of Pittsburgh exist in a kind of definitional limbo. On the one hand, they are better writers than the students in Basic Reading and Writing. They can exercise enough control over written language to produce a full-length narrative from personal experience. But they are set apart from our average, General Writing students by an apparent inability to state what larger context of ideas, feelings, or values the related experience could be said to represent. When asked, say, to write about a time when they made a decision and then to offer some general conclusions about decision-making, our Basic Writers typically either draw no such conclusions at all or end their papers with such brief tags as, "Making a successful decision is very rewarding," or, "Decisions can change your life." Statements like these only masquerade as conclusions for a paper. They are so vague, so equally applicable to nearly any decision one could write about, that they fail to function as generalizations, that is, as statements which connect two or more events, placing them in some category on the basis of shared characteristics--at least some of which the writer has specifically named in the paper.

What I share with other Basic Writing teachers at the University of Pittsburgh is a belief that the problem <u>is</u> one of naming.

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That is, what we feel we need is a Basic Writing course that is centered in the act of language-using. David Bartholomae recently described the relationship between method and purpose in our Basic Writing classes in this way:

> The instruction in writing, which is basically achieved through discussion of mimeographed copies of student papers, directs students in a systematic investigation of how they as individuals write, and of what they and their fellow students have written.

"Growth," he goes on to say," takes place not through the acquisition of general rules but through the writer's learning to see his language in relation to the languages around him, and through such perception, to test and experiment with that language."[1] The key term here, for my purposes, is "perception." What I want to argue in this paper is that Basic Writers need to actually see their own written language and to compare it with visible examples of the work of other students before they can develop a sense of the symbolic relationship between language and experience, the kind of understanding that will enable them to place what they write about into some larger context of meaning.

Our Basic Writing students have had very little experience with this kind of seeing. In two surveys of incoming Freshmen which I administered in the Fall terms of 1978 and 1979, the evidence I got made me feel that it is difficult to talk about the past writing experiences of the Basic Writers in any but negative terms. In comparison to the other students in the composition

[1] David Bartholomae, "Teaching Basic Writing: An Alternative to Basic Skills," Journal of Basic Writing, Vol. 2, No. 2.

program-- including the Basic Reading and Writing students-- the Basic Writers had taken less composition instruction, had written less and in a smaller number of modes of discourse, had spent less time in class on matters other than grammar and editing, had had less experience with peer group paper reading, had spent less time looking over their papers in conference with their teachers, and had been less encouraged to revise their papers (unless they received a "D" or "F" grade). They characteristically spend less time on prewriting than the more competent General Writing students, and they do less rereading and less revising both during and after the completion of a draft.

This lack of experience with their own writing-- what I'm calling metaphorically a writer's "limbo"-- helps explain, I think, a deep-seated attitude that Basic Writers bring into our writing classes. This is a conviction that language is a <u>given</u> in the situation at hand. When asked, for example, to write about an important decision, the Basic Writer replies, "Well, I take the options that are there, weigh them equally, and decide on which is best." That the "options" have to be defined, not merely located, that their number ahd "weight" might depend on that process of definition, that the success of the ourtcome might depend on the way standards are named-- these are not seen as issues for comment, much less concern.

I don't mean to suggest that such an attitude results from any cognitive deficiency; I don't see evidence for that. I would suggest instead that the problem lies in that particular kind of illiteracy I have defined, our students' lack of experience as creators of original written language. For Basic Writers, there is no effective counterweight to given ways of using language, no felt need to create terms that will bridge different kinds of events, create new classifications for understanding what they have done. The fact that Basic Writers have been asked in high school to write mainly expressive discourse means that they have been accustomed to compose what they write by means of the structures of narrative and description. And that means that they have been making meaningful connections primarily according to classifications of experience in time and space, a set of terms which are learned so early in life that we all tend to think of them as givens, even as intuitive modes of perception, rather than as formal categories composed by language. I would suggest that the same is also true for conventional ways of offering conclusions about events, those clichéd expressions that trail after our students' narratives-- for example, the talk about decision-making as a process of "weighing" options. These, too, are learned very young. These, too, can come to be regarded as part of the natural order of things, part <u>of</u> the experience one is writing about.

I can see this attitude at work in the comments my students make about writing early in the semester. Paula, for example, wrote this in her writer's journal in response to some class work we had done in pre-writing heuristics:

> Asking all those questions didn't change anything I wanted to say in my paper. I mean, the facts were there, so I wrote them down.

What a comment like this suggests is that even the specific sentences which a writer uses to describe an experience are regarded by the Basic Writer as givens, something "there" in the experience, not statements referring to it. There is no sense that "facts" are statements and therefore created, and no sense that this creation is a matter of choice dependent upon what the writer wants the situation symbolically to represent. So the problems the Basic Writer has with generalizations "beyond the sentence" begin, I would suggest, with naïve assumptions about what a writer is supposed to do when asked to "narrate" and to "describe."

So that's where I begin the semester, by asking students to compare the specific statements they have made about events they have described. My first set of assignments asks students to describe in one paper an important decision they have made, and in another to describe an activity which they do because they consider it "intrinsically interesting," something they do

"for themselves." In each case, the assignments ask the writers to go on to state how these narratives are representative of the way they make decisions.

As soon as I can, I ditto copies of student papers which deal with more or less the same topics--- hunting or dancing or choosing a college--- in order that students may be confronted with the many different ways writers can choose to describe the same kind of activity. There are always students at this point who seem to be unable or unwilling to think about what these differences mean. But there are others whose perceptions of these specific papers begin a process of re-seeing what writing can be all about. Wendy, for example, recreated in her journal later on in the semester her experiences during this first week of classes:

> "Vague?" What does she mean by "vague?" My English teacher in high school never once told me I was vague. Well, this English teacher doesn't know what she is talking about, and I am not about to change my writing habits for her.

By the second week of classes, however, Wendy had begun to change her mind:

> Several handouts were given out in class one day. While reading over the papers, I noticed that they were completely different than my writings. Every incident on paper was described clearly and vividly, and I realized at that moment that I wanted to develop a pattern too. But how would I go about changing my work? I thought to myself, "Hey, I am not an Emily Dickenson! So what do I do?"

Well, Wendy may have been unsure of exactly <u>what</u> to do, but she had at least taken her first steps out of the Basic Writer's limbo. She had seen that having something substantial

and interesting to say was more than just picking a topic, and that getting there meant that she would have to "develop a pattern," that is, define a stance towards her topics that would be consistent, general, and strategic, a "style" as Young, Becker, and Pike define it: a "particular way of behaving."[2] And equally important here is the fact that my teacherly comments in the margins were not what did this to Wendy: "Vague;" "Give examples;" "Be specific." What enabled the change was Wendy's actually seeing for herself the kinds of choices that had been made by other writers at her own level. In her own words, it was "at that moment" that she began to understand that writers become good writers because of the kinds of choices, the "patterns," that they bring to the task.

Once students begin to see that writing is a matter of choice, that facts are created and not just found, I ask them to consider how the way in which an experience is defined from the start determines the kinds of decisions that are made after that. One assignment asks students to write about the decisions they made when they engaged in some creative planning for an event, and then a following assignment asks them to compare what they said about creative decision-making to what they can say about a time when they just jumped into an experience without much planning or thought, just to see what would happen. A second, parallel pair of assignments asks the students to write about what happens

[2] Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), p.359.

when they do a lot of creative planning for papers, and then asks them to go on to compare what they've said about creative planning to what they can say about their experiences of starting a paper by "just beginning," that is, writing down the first thoughts that come to mind and seeing where one can go from there. Then the fifth assignment, the final one for this part of the sequence, asks students to compare what they said in the first two experiential papers with what they said in the second pair of papers, the ones about writing, in order to find terms in one paper that can also be applied to another, in order, that is, to generalize. The assignment asks, "Can you use any of the ways you talked about yourself as a decision-maker in either of the first two papers in order to talk about yourself as a writer? Or vice versa?" It's that, "or vice versa," that's particularly important here. Because of their minimal and poor experiences with writing in the past, Basic Writers typically see writing as an alien discipline, something not connected to other experiences in their lives. But the assignment suggests that such a rigid compartmentalization need not be considered as a given, and the assignment does this not just by saying "compare and contrast" but by inviting students to experiment with the process of naming, to use language in a way that moves across the boundaries which ordinarily divide writing from their other experiences. It asks

them to classify their behavior in a new way. I knew we were getting somewhere when Jim, a writer who had seemed particularly unable to move beyond simple narrative, opened this next paper with the statement, "I guess I have to consider myself a classical 'just beginning' kind of person."

Once students see that generalization begins with a process of naming, what Kenneth Burke would call creating positive terms,[3] I go on to invite them to consider the way in which decision-making is always a step beyond that level. A decision always represents a choice between at least two nameable options, each of which is a generalization about some hypothetical situation that would result from a particular decision. The defining of these terms is usually interrelated, that is, the way in which one term is defined is understood in light of what the other terms do or do not mean, a dynamic process that Burke would call "dialectical."

My students first saw for themselves this process of naming related options when I passed out a paper by Mark. He had written about a trip he had made hiking through Yellowstone Park in the summer, choosing to take risks that ordinary tourists never even consider. This was what he said in his conclusion:

> Many people will say, "How can you stand such an experience?" These are the people who walk with their eyes looking down all the time, or, when looking about, never seeing. For looking and seeing are two different things. And seeing nature is a wondrous beauty; if it wasn't why have so many artists tried to replicate it?

[3]Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 183-89.

What Mark does here is to turn "looking" and "seeing" into metaphors for the whole process of defining and choosing attitudes towards a situation, choices which determine what that situation will finally come to mean. But what's more important is that the class saw this in a way I could never have told them about. As one student wrote in his journal after this discussion,

> This writer had an experience that made him understand his love for doing something. But it was only after the author realized his experience that he really understood or "saw" his love.

By this point in the course, then, these students were coming to realize that the use of language to define the meaning of an experience lies outside of the event itself, and that it does this in more than one way. We define our expectations about what is going to happen in a situation, and these definitions shape our subsequent choices. But we also use language to look back, to redefine our sense of what a past experience has meant. Kim, for example, transformed Mark's "looking" and "seeing" into her own terms for generalizing about the relationship between past experience and writing about past experience:

> Recently I "saw" an experience that I had previously just "looked at" when I was writing my paper about the trip I took to Ohio. I have always viewed that the reason that I did this was to surprise my friend because it was her birthday; but while writing the paper I "saw" a different reason. When I was trying to express my feelings about the trip, I found that they were in conflict; I now had my old feelings and my new feelings.

> I now "saw" that my reason was to have the thrill of taking an adventurous trip. I feel everyone develops a different attitude after looking at the activity another time. By re-looking over your experience you are able to reveal things you might not ever have realized.

What Kim terms "relooking over experience" becomes the theme for the last set of assignments in this sequence.[4] I ask students to write about an experience in which they changed their decision-making because something strange about a situation had become familiar--- as had happened to Mark as he gained skill as a backpacker--- or because something familiar had become strange--- as had happened to Kim when she reconsidered an experience she hadn't thought of in years. Then, in a pair of assignments, I ask students also to write about the decisions they make and remake when they draft papers and when they revise them, so that, in the process of examining their earlier drafts for the course, they can see how options get renamed because writers monitor the effects of initial decisions as they continue to write, shifting course, changing strategies, struggling to fuse past and present languages into one meaningful whole.

The final assignment in the sequence asks students to write a longer paper about themselves as decision-makers, incorporating into it generalizations and examples drawn from the papers they

[4] This sequence of assignments takes us through about ten of the fourteen weeks of the trimester. The remaining assignments for the course also are about decision-making. Students are asked to write more general, "expository" essays which give them a chance to test out what they've learned about decision-making against remarks by non-student writers, e.g., Herb Simon.

have written for the course so far. They must, therefore, create even broader generalizations, use language to bridge even more dissimilar situations. But I invite them to do it by looking back over their earlier papers and using terms in one or two of them to revise papers about experiences originally discussed according to a different set of terms. For example, a paper that was originally a narrative illustrating "creativity" in decision-making might come to be reformulated as an example of the relationship between knowledge and decision-making, between "looking" and "seeing." Students find this assignment difficult, but by now the difficulty lies in the sense of challenge we all would feel, not in some misapprehension about what a writer can make an experience mean. They generally can complete the task, given some support in conferences, a lot of opportunity to revise, and, especially, my insistence that they work mainly from what they've already written, since further generalizations, what we'd call real conclusions, are always language about language, that is, generalizations made on the basis of previous general and specific statements.

When it finally does work, when that ambitious piece of writing finally does come together, students find out that what Kim said was true, that "re-looking over" what they have written does reveal things they never would have realized otherwise. And since I've been arguing that this direct encounter with their

own ideas objectified on the page is more important than anything we can tell them about the writing process, I think I would be appropriate to end here not with my words, but with the conclusions of Jeff, a student whose paper defined better than I can just what this sequence of assignments is about:

> The creativity papers, in my opinion, play an important part in revealing to me the way in which I make decisions. They made me make decisions that required a lot of thought. When I decided what was creative to me, I first had to define the word and then see if my definition fit anything that I did. Looking back at those choices I had to make, I can almost see how I make decisions.